

# Viewpoints

## School vouchers — the origin of an idea

In mid-June, Weber State University had the honor of hosting the annual Boys' State Conference. Near the end of the conference, Gov. Jon Huntsman spoke to the Boys' State participants. The focus of his remarks was school vouchers. The governor stressed the importance of informing Utahns about this critical issue. The effort to inform Utahns on the issue of school vouchers is necessary. On Nov. 6, Utahns will be asked to vote on the issue. The outcome of the vote will influence the future of education in Utah for many years.

Perhaps the best way to become better informed on the issue of school vouchers is to read what the originator of the school voucher concept had to say about the issue.

The concept of school vouchers was originally proposed by the Nobel-prize winning economist Milton Friedman. Coincidentally, the concept of school vouchers isn't Friedman's only connection to Utah. Friedman spent 20 winter vacations at Utah's Alta ski resort with his good friend William F. Buckley.

In 1955, Friedman wrote an essay, "The Role of Government in Education," in which he proposed vouchers as a way to allow children from low- and moderate-income families to have access to private schools. Both opponents

### Top of Utah Voices



**Michael Vaughan**

■ **Commentary**

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and advocates of Utah's proposed voucher program should find Friedman's essay interesting reading. You can find the essay on the Web site of the Friedman Foundation ([friedmanfoundation.org](http://friedmanfoundation.org)).

As the architect of school vouchers, Friedman carefully considered the implications and details of his proposals. Some of his thoughts on the voucher issue have received little attention by either advocates or opponents of school vouchers in Utah. Perhaps the most important conclusion is Friedman's belief that school vouchers would cause a large-scale migration of students from public education to private schools.

In general, he saw little reason for the government to be in the business of running schools. The only exception he mentions in his essay is the need for the government to continue to operate a small number of public schools in small rural areas where there

would not be a sufficient number of students to support a private school.

Whether one is a supporter or opponent of school vouchers largely depends upon one's perception of the desirability of private education and the quality of public education. Clearly, vouchers are intended to direct students away from public schools into private schools.

Friedman believed that the number of students redirected to private schools would be

large and he was convinced

that the migration of students from public education to private schools was desirable.

Indeed, Friedman believed the migration to private schools would improve the nation's system of education.

While Friedman didn't see government as an important provider of educational services, he did believe that government would need to establish educational standards for school vouchers to function effectively.

Friedman wrote, "The role of the government would

be limited to assuring that schools met certain minimum standards."

Friedman's call for the government regulation of educational standards may seem to conflict with his belief that government shouldn't interfere with the rights of individuals to do as they please.

The resolution to this apparent conflict lies in the fact that as the provider of vouchers the government itself is the actual buyer of educational services. The government isn't interfering with the rights of buyers. The

government is the buyer, and as the buyer the government has every right to make certain the educational services it is purchasing are a high-quality product.

The role of the

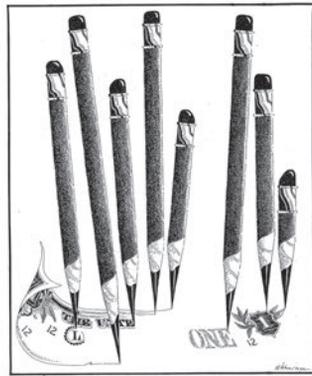
government in setting education standards has not received much attention during the current voucher debate.

Voters considering Utah's voucher proposal need to consider the state's policies for regulating educational standards.

Given that vouchers would be used by students attending private schools, the government would need to establish strict standards for private schools including proprietary and parochial schools. Utah will need to have the will to enforce strict educational quality standards or the voucher proposal will not have the intended result. Friedman campaigned for school vouchers for much of his life.

It is somewhat ironic that Friedman died just weeks before the Utah House passed the voucher bill. Patrick Byrne, the CEO of Utah-based Overstock.com described the Utah voucher legislation by saying, "This is the biggest step that has been taken toward achieving Milton Friedman's dream of liberating children so they can reach their full potential."

When Utah voters go to the polls to decide the voucher issue they can either thank or curse an economist named Milton Friedman.



### STATE OF THE UNION

By Carl Moore



### DOONESBURY

By Garry Trudeau

